

Awakening

© Copyright 2009 by silli_artie@hotmail.com

This work may not be reposted or redistributed without the prior express written permission of the author.

A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

One

Paul straightened his tie and opened the door to the outer office. The impeccably dressed secretary sitting behind the desk gave him a curt smile. "He's expecting you -- please go right in," she said efficiently, pressing a button on her desk.

Paul took a breath, nodded, and stepped to the inner door, opening it and stepping into the dark mahogany paneled office.

The man behind the desk looked up and capped his fountain pen. "Mister Harris, do come in. I've been expecting you," the man said with surprising calmness.

Paul closed the door and stepped in front of the desk.

"Please, have a seat," the man gestured.

Paul sat down. And waited. The man at the desk sat patiently, hands steepled.

Finally, Paul started in. "Sir, the subject appears to be missing, He was last observed at 9:12 this morning."

The man gestured to the small flat screen display which had been added to his desk in the last week. The display showed an empty cell illuminated by a flashing red light. "Something we agree on -- I don't see him either. Can you explain this?"

Paul took a breath. "Sir, I can only tell you what we have observed. One moment he was there and the next moment he wasn't."

"Has the cell been opened and examined?" the man asked.

"No Sir. Per procedure, the cell has been flooded with anesthetic gas and sealed. The interior volume has been probed and appears to be empty. The mass indicators have ceased their anomalous responses, and indicate an empty cell. Under..."

Awakening

The man nodded. "I thought so; I thought he was playing around. Did you increase surveillance?"

Paul was trying to stay calm. How could you increase surveillance in a cell which had five cameras that were recorded and monitored by both humans and machines twenty four hours a day, and one side of the cell including the only way in or out was three inch thick transparent plastic with two live guards sitting twelve feet away? "Yes Sir, we did, last week. We brought on additional monitoring, such as the live display on your desk." That had been a good political move, Paul still thought. "We also stationed an additional live guard at the monitoring point, brought in from a different service, so that they were not familiar with the operation of the facility, not indoctrinated with those operational patterns."

The man actually smiled! "Very good, young man, very good! Now review this mass thing for me once more -- briefly." The man turned to the side, still steeping his hands in front of him.

"Thank you, Sir. One of the design elements of the center, each cell is in a reinforced concrete block. Five sides of the cell are inch thick metal. The sixth side, with the only door, is three inches of transparent plastic. Other than the door, no cell opening is greater than 20 square inches. Each cell has five full-time, high resolution, multi-spectral cameras, one in each of the four top corners and one in the center of the ceiling. These cameras are recorded and monitored by computer and by live personnel. Additionally, each cell is monitored by mass detectors; essentially the cell is on a scale, a scale with resolution of a fraction of an ounce. Everything going into and out of the cell is weighed and accounted for. We know when a subject takes a dump. Starting..." Paul flipped to his notes to be sure, "eight days ago, the mass detectors, there are multiple detectors per cell, for the subject's cell, and only the subject's cell, started reporting anomalous data. Now if a subject jumps up and down in a cell, the mass detectors sense this -- jumping, reduced mass when the subject is in the air, and impact when the subject hits the cell floor again. In the subject's cell, the mass detectors started producing anomalous readings which did not correlate with visible motion. Initially the readings wavered over a range in agreement with subject's weight. We contacted you at that point, and as you recall, I gave you a briefing at that time." A grilling was more like it.

"Yes, I remember -- continue, please," The man said calmly, still looking off to the side over his steeped hands.

"The anomalous readings continued, at times swinging through zero. The cell rests on four steel shafts that extend through holes in the concrete structure. A secure maintenance area is below that level, containing mass sensors, screening for water and waste lines, and so on. All mass sensors for the subject's cell were replaced. The old sensors have been sent for analysis. Anomalies continued. At one point on Saturday, if the sensors are to be believed, the mass was swinging between full cell mass and zero, twelve hundred times a second for thirty seconds. During this period subject was standing, brushing his teeth. The engineering staff ... the engineering staff were going nuts, Sir -- they don't understand how such a thing was possible, as those systems don't have the bandwidth for such an oscillation."

Awakening

The man smiled and nodded again. “Told you he was a’funnin with you...” momentarily lapsing into the language patterns of his youth.

“Yes, Sir -- and they replaced all sensors, again, with modules which are heavily shielded and each uses two different measurement methods. Anomalies ceased shortly before the modules were swapped out, and resumed four hours after replacement and checkout was completed.”

“A’funnin y’all sure as a coon dawg got fleas...”

“Yes, Sir -- we understood. The developer is testing an optical strain gauge which...”

“Why in blazes didn’t you just move him to a different cell!” the man thundered suddenly.

Paul’s heart nearly skipped a beat, yet as he recovered, he almost smiled. “Sir, as we reviewed before -- moving the subject involves orders of magnitude more risk than dealing with anomalous but duplicative sensor readings. The mass readings are secondary information, secondary to primary, visual observation. To move the subject from one cell to another requires unsealing the cell and moving the subject through far less secure environments. We reviewed the risk analysis, and you agreed it was not prudent. It is still not prudent.”

The man turned to Paul, and his fearsome visage actually softened for a moment. “Good, son,” he said softly. “What happened this morning?”

Paul exhaled, but didn’t relax. “Thank you, Sir. Subject woke this morning at the usual time, exercised, had breakfast, and was exercising again when...”

“Mister Harris,” the man interrupted, “You do yourself and all of us a disservice when you call what that man was doing mere ‘exercise.’ My oldest daughter has taught Hatha Yoga, and taught Yoga instructors, for decades. She’s spent God knows how much time in India studying with Masters. Last week I showed her some recordings of the subject. When she watched that man, she was in awe, Mister Harris -- in her professional opinion the subject is a Master practicing at a level reachable only by a few *hundred* people on the planet! When we viewed recordings where those mass anomalies coincided with his ‘exercise,’ she was able to predict them -- I shielded the bottom of the display with the mass detector tracks from her view, and she told me when he’d do it, and damn she was right! I don’t understand what she said, but to her, there are points in the sequences he does where he generates a lot of energy -- and that’s when the anomalies hit.”

“Sir, if you can give me her contact information, we should interview her as soon as possible, please.”

The man nodded, smiling ever so slightly. “I almost said that was one of the first intelligent things I’d heard from you, Mister Harris, but you and your people have done as good a job, or better, than could possibly be expected. My secretary has the information ready for

Awakening

you, and my daughter is waiting for a call. I warn you, though, that if your people give her grief -- warn those people that if they upset my baby girl, her old man's gonna put on his hobnail boots and come a'callin; it won't be pretty!"

Paul managed a slight smile. "I will, Sir -- and thank you."

The man nodded, thoughtful once more.

"If I may summarize, Sir?"

"Please."

Paul took a breath. "Subject was under direct and machine observation according to enhanced protocol. At approximately 9:12:44 this morning, subject disappeared from view. Automated systems raised the alarm followed by manually activated alarms milliseconds later. As per protocol, the entire facility is under lockdown. No other anomalies reported. While subject's cell has not been opened at this time, to all indications subject is not present. Correlation with other sensors, including mass sensors throughout the facility, indicate loss of mass correlating closely with the missing subject. That is all we know at this time."

The man scowled, standing up. "There's a report that some circuit breakers in the facility popped at the same time?"

Paul frowned a bit. "I haven't seen those reports, Sir."

The man nodded. "Forwarded to me in the last five minutes, while you were in transit. It would seem our boy can eat electricity..."

Paul didn't have a reply to that. He took a controlled breath, stabilizing himself.

"Can you explain to me," the man said in increasing volume, "how the hell you can let a man just vanish? How in blazes did he get away?" he shouted, arms raised.

"We have no idea, Sir," Paul told him.

"Well you'd better get an idea, and fast!" the man bellowed. "This is completely inexcusable! How can a man simply vanish from this country's most secure facility? Who helped him? We are going to get answers, and heads are going to roll! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir," Paul said flatly.

The man dropped his arms back to his sides and shook his head, sighing. "I know you do, son -- you and your people have done a good job. But the people *I* report to aren't as understanding as I am. You won't get the axe, and neither will I -- that's why we keep that batch of cabbages around..." He swung an arm indicating a different part of the building. "So when the bastards on the hill demand heads, we've got some to give them. Let your people know,

Awakening

unofficially, that what they've done is of the highest professional standard as far as I'm concerned. They know the rest. Get the info from Elaine and give my daughter a call -- maybe she can shed some light on this. I know you've got people working on it, but keep me informed, unofficially as well as formally, as to their thoughts. I sure as blazes don't know how he got out of there, and I was watching the damned display when it happened! I spilled half a cup of coffee; Elaine yelled at me, and my wife's gonna give me hell when she sees the stain on my pants. He's going through his routine, doing things I can't name let alone do, and poof! Gone! I don't know how he did it, and I'm not sure any of us really *wants* to know -- I have the feeling this is a real Pandora's box we're scratching at. I'll do my best to protect you and your people; you know that. But you also know we're in for a rough ride."

He paused and took a breath, sighing as he exhaled. He extended a hand.

Paul stood and shook his hand.

"Thank you, Mister Harris. We'll survive this one. We'll survive better if we can find that bastard. Something tells me it ain't going to be easy, though."

"Thank you for your support, Sir. I'll keep you informed, no matter how wild the idea."

The man was already turning to gaze out his window. "The wilder the better on this one, I think," he muttered.

Two

Paul closed his eyes for a moment, taking a breath, exhaling, then opening his eyes again. He looked to the group on the other side of his desk, three of them sitting, two standing behind those three. “Tell me again how I explain this ... thing ... to The Old Man?” he entreated, holding the smoke-detector sized gadget in his hand.

Connor, their lead, spoke up. “Paul, you don’t *explain* it, you *sell* it,” he repeated. “We’re giving you the background to help you *sell* it. This,” he pointed to the gadget, “takes advantage of our superman’s, our subject’s, genetics. It creates a field that incapacitates only him or one of his kind. So by...”

“This is where The Old Man leans back and calls it panther repellent,” Paul said with a frown, dropping the device on his desk for emphasis.

“Panther what?” Jenkins, sitting next to Connor said.

“Panther repellent,” Paul repeated, picking it up and waving it around. “You see any panthers around here? It’s working!”

Jenkins frowned, but Connor smiled. “That’s exactly why we have this,” he said, reaching to the gadget and pressing a small partially recessed button.

The way Paul was holding it, the gadget was pointed directly at his head. A small red LED turned on and the unit chirped. At the same time, Paul felt incredibly dizzy, and started to pitch forward. Doing so took him out of the gadget’s beam. He dropped it on the table, luckily pointing straight up and not sweeping anyone else in the room.

“That’s the test mode,” Connor continued, “which generates a beam effective on the normal population. Protocol is to put it into test mode once per shift, wave an arm inside the target area, and verify sensation.”

“I got that. Still, this,” he picked up the gadget, weighing it in his hand, “is the cheap part -- if one of these things flattens someone, so what? Got to be a warm body around to do the right thing, and quickly.”

Connor nodded. “That’s why with the four hundred ten...”

“Four thirty,” a voice from the back row interjected.

Connor continued, “Four hundred thirty we have deployed currently, each comes with a staff of four on six hour shifts, and we rotate those around. Those people are trained -- hell, we condition them, but those details aren’t for public consumption -- when this thing beeps and someone goes down, they hit them with the hypodermic first, and then hit the red button on their phones. They carry three automatic hypos -- if we catch a group of more than three, get the smallest or youngest first, and then go from the largest/oldest on down. This is going by Nancy

and her group's analysis of our subject's capture -- they concluded that the antipsychotic drugs given to him at the start of his involuntary psychiatric hold poisoned his talents. The contents of the hypo have a very wide safety margin, and should be effective for three hours at least on anyone three hundred pounds or lighter. We estimate recovery and transport crew on site in 45 minutes worst case. But yeah, manpower is a big part of it."

"And what if one of them spills the beans? I don't wanna see this on the cover of a grocery store tabloid."

Connor nodded. "Another reason for conditioning over mere training... They don't know what they're looking for, any more than we do, really. If the thing beeps and someone goes down, they jump."

Paul nodded as well. "Coverage? How many for how long?"

Connor shook his head. He looked to the back row to one of his back-ups, who shrugged. "Zillion dollar question. Recapturing the original subject? If I was him, I'd be on the West Coast of Australia, sipping a cold one and watching the sun go down. He does that, stays out of North America, we'll never catch him. But -- he is a member of a cohort defined as a genetically identifiable class. We can identify members of that cohort using the gadget. The question then becomes one of prevalence of the cohort in the overall population. Frankly, we expect them to be damn rare, no more than a hundred in North America, right?" He looked to the back row and got a head nod. "You also need to remember there's a difference between the presence of the syndrome and the training and ability to use it. Actually, we're hoping we catch a green one; we feel the odds of everyone surviving are higher. We're deploying to every location where our subsidiaries have screening duties, at no cost to the customer. We guesstimate a hit before the end of the calendar year. A bigger rollout to certain sites, there's a little over sixty on the list, should get us at least one hit within three to four months."

Paul frowned a little, scanning the list again. "I don't understand this -- international arrival areas at airports -- I get that, sheer volume. But the list of museums? I've never heard of the Mutter in Philadelphia. What's that about?"

Connor smiled. "That's the coverage group's part of the list. They postulate certain traits, interests in our target cohort -- history, science, and technology. As the coverage group says, you want to catch fruit flies, bait your traps with an apple pie, not a cow pie."

Paul smirked. "That's an explanation The Old Man would appreciate."

Nervous laughter from the group.

Paul sighed again. It wasn't going to be easy, but it was their best shot. "Okay, guys, can't think of anything else. When do we saturate coverage, given current deployment?"

Connor looked to one of his back row, who said, "Three weeks domestic, five international."

Awakening

Connor winced.

Paul frowned severely. "International? I thought this was strictly a domestic deal?"

Connor gave an evident frown to his back row colleague. "It is. But we've got subs we could possibly use in the U.K., France, and Germany -- just as a test, mind you, nothing official."

Paul nodded, still frowning. "Yeah. Like you said -- nothing official. But if one of these gets away," picking up the gadget, "or it hits the press, it's someone's ass -- starting with guess who."

Connor nodded. "I figured that. We're playing this one real close to the vest."

"Keep it that way and we might have a chance of making it to retirement. Thanks, guys - good job. Now go catch the bastard so I don't have to sell this to The Old Man next week."

Three

Rob smiled as he got off the plane in Chicago. Customs, luggage roulette, a few hours of waiting, another few hours on another plane, and he'd be back home on the West Coast!

Except that walking down a narrow hallway, all of a sudden he was so dizzy, collapsing forward, not even feeling hitting the floor.

Four

Carol was still laughing; it had been such a lucky find! Wandering neighborhoods with her friend Judy, stopping at Santa Monica garage sales, she stumbled upon a slew of old paper files from a guy who worked at A&M Records in the sixties -- and saw memo after memo that documented their incompetence in the way they handled one of her dad's favorite bands, Earth Quake! Just what she needed for her thesis -- and the woman hosting the garage sale gave them to her! She'd finished scanning them over the weekend, and had a CD ready for her thesis advisor, meeting her at the museum for lunch.

But as she stepped through the museum's main entrance, she was suddenly so dizzy...

Five

Paul sat nervously, hands clasped, looking at the man sitting behind his desk, nodding as he spoke with someone on the phone. But he wasn't talking -- he was listening, and not enjoying it. The conversation was definitely one-way.

"Yes, I understand," the man said. "No, I'm not agreeing at all! You have barged in to the middle of a complex operation, taking over, kidnapping two innocent people! ... Yes, I understand -- you've said that already. ... No, you'll get no such agreement from me, not even at gunpoint! ... That's not 'sharing' -- that's taking everything we've done and giving us nothing in return, which is what you've done so far. ... I understand. Good bye."

The man hung up the phone and paused for a moment, holding the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, eyes closed.

Opening his eyes, he addressed Paul and the two with him. "Gentlemen -- as we surmised, *they* have both subjects and aren't interested in discussing the matter any further. They say they have more experience dealing with these matters, as well as jurisdiction. Oh, and they want all our files, which as you heard, I declined to provide. I strongly suggest you destroy everything you can as quickly as you can." He sighed again. "I understand what we had planned for those two wasn't exactly according to Hoyle, but now ... I suggest we keep those two in our prayers; it may be the only hope they have."

Paul nodded. Since the whole thing was clandestine, they'd planned a rapid takedown protocol. He turned to one of his colleagues and said, "Tell Jenny to go ahead, stat." The whole thing had been too successful by half -- six weeks of nothing, then two subjects found within twelve hours of each other, on their way to Bethesda, intercepted by armed assault teams. He shook his head and sighed. They could all use prayers at this stage.

Six

Rob woke suddenly, with a splitting headache and intense nausea. Throwing back light covers, he looked around -- an unfamiliar dimly lit room -- but spotted a metal toilet a few feet away. He lurched towards it.

And barely reached it before what little was in his stomach found its way out his mouth.

Carol woke suddenly, sitting up, hearing -- a man throwing up? She put a hand to her head -- she had a headache. She didn't recognize the room she was in, nor the man. He looked to be in his forties, short brown hair with a white streak, fit and trim in shorts and a t-shirt. The whole ceiling glowed, lighting the place. One door, no windows, some shelves, a table and two chairs. Clock on the wall said 8:15. Where was she?

She stood up, wobbly. She was wearing a gray t-shirt and gray boxer shorts too. She wanted out, now! She stepped to the door, less wobbly with each step, and grabbed the knob.

Rob startled at the shriek, turning his head. A woman stood near the door, shaking out her hands and crying.

He would have looked more, but duty called, again.

Carol jumped back, shaking her hands and crying, surprised by the strength of the electrical shock she'd received. She meant to be just loud, but it came out as a scream, "Who are you? Where are we? Let me out of here!"

Rob turned his head, but only for a moment. As he ducked down for another round his left hand found a flush button, which he pushed.

Something struck him as odd -- not a lot of water, and vacuum assist? Metal toilet? Where were they indeed?

After a few more minutes, Rob was able to sit back against the wall, panting and still partially holding on to the toilet. The (young) woman was cowering in the corner by the door.

He looked around more. Glowing ceiling, rectangular room, things in three spots in the ceiling, one dead center, the other two along the centerline lengthways. He'd bet at least one was a camera. Metal walls, textured metal floor. One door, no windows, and the place felt funny. He should remember the feeling, he thought. Kitchen area -- sink, microwave. Refrigerator? Table and two chairs, display built into the wall, keyboard and mouse? Analog clock on the wall said about 8:20. Nightstands beside the queen-sized bed a few feet away from him. Stall shower next to the toilet, with a towel bar above the toilet, white towels. Ten by sixteen room, maybe ten by eighteen, something like that?

He closed his eyes and worked on his breathing. "Water?" he managed to say.

Awakening

“W... What?” Carol replied.

Rob pointed to the sink. “Water, please?” he asked, then hung his head over the plastic seat and metal bowl again.

Carol moved slowly, uneasily. She opened a cupboard door above the sink and found a plastic drinking glass. She filled it most of the way with water and gingerly handed it to the man.

Rob nodded as he took the glass. The first two mouthfuls were rinse and spit, the rest he swallowed. “Thanks,” he panted, head over the bowl again. He leaned back and hit the button again.

“Uh, I need to...” Carol said, gesturing to the toilet.

Rob nodded and crawled back to the bed. It was a mattress on a low platform, with drawers in the platform. Still sitting mostly on the floor, he leaned on the bed. He heard the toilet flush again. That was something he should do, he realized, when he was up to it. Not now.

A touch on his shoulder -- he turned. She looked pretty, and young. Same outfit as his, t-shirt and boxers, but it looked much better on her.

“Do you know where we are, or what’s going on?” Carol asked.

Rob shook his head; not a good idea. “No -- I’m Rob by the way. Last thing I knew, I was in Chicago at the airport heading for Customs.”

“I’m Carol -- I was in Los Angeles, going to meet my thesis advisor at the Natural History Museum for lunch.”

Rob felt something, and another wave. “We’re on a boat! We’re on a fucking boat!” he moaned as he crawled to the toilet again. The few swallows of water he’d had made their exit.

“That’s what I feel,” Carol muttered in agreement. She got the water glass and refilled it.

“Are you sure?” she asked, kneeling next to him, putting one hand on his back.

He nodded, panting into the bowl. “Pretty damn sure -- I get seasick in a bathtub!” He took the glass, a rinse and then some swallows. “You tried the door?” he managed to ask.

“It ... it shocked me,” she said.

He panted. “I need to use the loo...”

She helped him sit up on it, and turned away.

Awakening

Rob did his business, flushing again, pulling up his boxers as he let himself slip to the floor, and crawled to the bed, leaning on it once again.

“What’s going on?” she asked, sitting beside him on the bed, needing to be close to someone.

“Don’t know,” Rob panted.

Seemingly in response, both felt dizzy and tingly. Rob felt Carol collapse on top of him as he faded.

When Rob woke, his mouth felt dry, but he wasn’t as nauseated. He’d been moved -- back on to the bed, on his back. He stayed where he was for a while. Moving around, he felt by his right ear -- a patch? “Damn,” he said.

“What?” Carol said beside him.

He turned over. She moved up on one elbow. “That dizzy feeling -- the last thing I felt in Chicago.”

She turned pale. “Me too, in L.A.! What’s it mean?”

Rob closed his eyes. “I’ve got a patch behind my right ear that wasn’t there before. It means we’re being monitored, and someone is willing to make changes.”

Carol’s response was immediate -- jumping up and screaming, “LET ME OUT OF HERE!” She ran to the door, but stopped short.

“Try your shirt,” Rob suggested.

Carol stood there for a moment, then grasped the knob through her shirt. No shock, but it didn’t open, either. “Shit,” she summarized.

Something started beeping.

Rob turned his head. The screen in the wall read, “Press mouse button.”

Carol went to the table.

“Wait for me,” Rob groaned. He half-crawled to the table, pulling himself up into a chair. The chairs were plastic.

A Mac keyboard and mouse were in a tray area of the table. Both were wireless. Carol clicked the mouse button.

Awakening

The display turned blue. A male voice came from speakers which must have been in the ceiling. "You are being held according to a National Security directive. As such, Constitutional guarantees are not applicable. Your only course is to cooperate fully with the process. You will be given more information as appropriate."

The screen went blank again.

Rob nodded. "Guess that answers a few questions." He smiled. "Let's answer another one, shall we?" He stood up, and put more water in the glass. He drank most of it.

He walked to the door. He poured a little water on the textured metal floor, and stepped in the water with his right foot, moving it around. He poured some water into his left hand and gave the glass to Carol. He rubbed his hands together. Looking up at the ceiling, he raised his left foot off the floor. "You bastards know my cardiac history?" he said clearly, then reached for the doorknob with his left hand.

"What..." Carol started to ask, but the dizziness descended over her once more.

Seven

Rob woke on the floor, Carol beside him. His left shoulder hurt; probably from falling on it, he reasoned. He rubbed it and laughed. Carol moved.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, helping her sit up.

Carol sat up, looking at him. “Why are you laughing?” she asked.

“Learned something,” he told her. “If I’d grabbed the knob, the shock would have gone from my left hand down through my right leg -- straight across my heart. So far at least, they want us alive.”

The voice sounded through the ceiling. “The doorknob is electrified. For your information, Doctor Marsh, there is a mechanical latch operable only from the outside. Additionally, there is a capacitance sensor connected to the knob. When activated, it electrifies the knob.”

“LET ME OUT OF HERE!” screamed Carol once more.

Silence.

“I think the answer to that is no,” Rob said. “But we now know they’re aware of who we are, sort of. I’m Rob Marsh -- I have doctorates in physics and mathematics, but I retired a few years ago to be a yoga teacher and troublemaker. How about you?”

“Carol Brandt. I’m a grad student at UCLA in Media Studies,” she sniffled.

Rob nodded, frowning. “And what we have in common is?”

To Carol’s questioning look he continued, “Someone went to some effort to pick us up and put us in this can on the high seas. If I’d flown into LAX rather than Chicago, I might be willing to consider that one of us was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But this, they wanted both of us for a reason. What? We must have something in common. Let’s see -- for me, yoga, physics, math, spicy food. You?”

Carol shook her head. “Media studies. I was a cheerleader and a dancer. I do Pilates, and I’m learning Tai Chi, and I play flute and piccolo.”

Rob smiled. “I play flute as well -- maybe they’re putting together a marching band?” More contemplation. “Okay, physical disciplines... Don’t know. Nothing jumps out yet. You?”

Carol frowned. “No... Where do you think we are?”

Awakening

"No idea, other than on a boat, dammit." He looked at his hands, then ran hands up his arms. "Oho -- here," he said, pointing at the inside of his right elbow. "Recent injection site -- I'd guess a few minutes ago. Do you have any? Let's see."

Looking at her arms, they didn't find anything.

"That's weird," she said, holding out her right hand.

"What?" Rob asked.

"We were doing our nails yesterday, and Shelly nicked my cuticle, yet it's healed now."

Rob thought, then ran a hand over his chin. "How often do you shave your legs and arms?"

"What?" she replied, moving back.

Rob shook his head. "Your cuticle didn't heal overnight -- try a day or three. I've been recently shaved -- I was day-old overgrown when I landed in Chicago. What can you tell from your legs and armpits? Anything?"

She felt her legs, and moved a hand to the other armpit. "I can't really tell, but yeah, my hand, that's two days; I yelled at Shelly that it would be two or three days before it healed."

"Okay. Let's see about something to eat. Gee, they had to do something about that -- my blood sugar goes too low and I get migraines. Hear that? Triptans, or I'm messed up for days."

Carol sighed. "I guess it has been a few days. I wonder if people are worrying? I've missed classes..."

"So have I," Rob grumbled, "ones I teach..."

Carol frowned and walked over to the refrigerator and cabinets. "Yuk! Cold cereal, skim milk, frozen stuff..."

"I'm for a big bowl of chocolate-frosted sugar bombs, or whatever Calvin called them," Rob said, getting off the floor.

"Corn flakes or raisin bran," Carol announced.

"Raisin bran it is," Rob sighed.

The two of them had cereal, sitting at the table and eating silently. Afterwards, Rob rinsed the bowls and spoons, dried them, and put them away.

"What now?" he asked.

Awakening

Carol sat in the chair again and shrugged her shoulders. “What do you think?” she asked, looking at Rob.

“Inventory the place?” Rob suggested.

She sighed and stood up. “Okay. Might as well start here.”

Nothing notable in the kitchen area, plastic utensils and the food they’d found, glasses and plates. Plastic chairs at the table and the display in the wall. Metal toilet, metal towel bar, metal stall shower with the same glowing ceiling.

The drawers on the mattress platform held more t-shirts, boxer shorts, and towels; a drawer on Rob’s side had his comb, brush, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and shampoo. “So they grabbed my luggage; the soap and shampoo were packed,” he muttered. “No electric shaver or charger though, and no meds.” Carol had a comb, brush, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and shampoo in the corresponding drawer on her side, but they weren’t the ones she usually used.

“Interesting,” Rob mused. “They grabbed my luggage and went through it, but didn’t pick up anything from where you lived.”

“So?”

Rob nodded, thinking. “Back to what we have in common -- what is it? I don’t think they were looking for us, specifically as individuals. I think we met some criteria, and were snatched.”

“What difference does it make?” Carol said, irritated. “We’re here.”

“That we are,” Rob agreed with a sigh.

After not too long, Carol asked, “Now what?”

Rob smiled. “I’m going to sit for a while, sit in meditation, and then do yoga. You’re welcome to join me.”

She frowned. “I don’t know how.”

Rob bowed his head a little. “I can teach you, if you’re interested.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Might as well.”

“Get us two big towels, please?” Rob requested as he stood up.

As Carol got towels, Rob got one of the cereal bowls out of the cupboard and filled it about a third full with water. He placed it on the floor. “Towel?” he asked, and said, “Thank

Awakening

you,” when Carol handed one to him. He folded it and put it on the floor, sitting on it, sitting so he was in front of the bowl.

“What’s that for?” Carol asked as she sat opposite.

“An oracle. I may look at it a bit. Ready to start?” he asked her.

She nodded.

“Sit up straight -- good posture, like in dance. Sit comfortably with good posture, ears, shoulders, and hips in a line. The first thing we practice is the Anapanasati -- relax, close your eyes, and focus on the sensation of the breath at the nostril. When the mind wanders, bring it back. Focus on the sensation of the breath at the nostril. Do this, please,” he requested.

“But what if,” she started.

“Focus on the breath at the nostril,” he repeated. “When the mind wanders, bring it back. That’s all. Please begin.” Rob closed his eyes.

Carol frowned for a moment, sighed, and closed her eyes.

Rob sat, letting the practice do him. Feeling the breath at the nostril, other air currents on his body. Gradually, awareness of warmth in front of him, her scent. When the mind wanders, bring it back... After a while he heard variations in her breathing. He opened his eyes and saw her moving, just a little, frowning a bit, then settling into it again. Good.

He let his gaze drop to the water in the bowl. Slow waves, some ripples. Ah, a series of ripples -- step, step, step? The spacing was right for steps. Back to waves and ripples.

A while later, without altering his posture, he glanced up at the clock. Half an hour had passed. She was good! Novices usually didn’t last this long!

“Very good,” he said softly, closing his eyes. “Shortly, I’ll clap my hands twice. When I do that, take a deep breath, and as you exhale, open your eyes. But for now, return to the sensation of the breath at the nostril. When the mind wanders, bring it back.”

Focus on the sensation of the breath at the nostril. He heard a movement, almost a whimper. He started to smile, but returned to the sensation of the breath.

Opening his eyes, glancing at the clock, eighteen minutes had passed. He smiled; she looked like she was in pain. This could be a teachable moment! Closing his eyes, taking a slow breath, raising his hands overhead and bringing them down into prayer, envisioning blue sky -- far away? Opening his eyes and clapping twice.

She smiled and opened her eyes, moving around, then sitting still when she realized he was watching.

Awakening

“Very good!” he praised.

She gave him a half frown.

Rob chuckled and held out his hands. “Please,” he asked.

She put her hands in his.

“What did you experience?” he asked.

She frowned. “I couldn’t sit still! And all these crazy thoughts! My left leg...”

“Did I say you had to sit still?” he asked.

She frowned. “Ah, no.”

“The pain in your left leg -- did it go away?”

She frowned a bit more. “Yeah, eventually, then it was my...”

“It changed. Impermanence -- all is change.”

She nodded, going quiet, but still holding his hands.

“Was that hard to do?”

“Oh yeah!” she agreed with a smile.

He smiled and nodded. “You felt discomfort?”

She nodded, not sure where this was going.

“But it went away?”

She nodded again.

“Impermanence -- all is change. When I clapped my hands, were you happy?”

She smiled broadly, “You bet!”

“But we’re still in here,” he said, and her smile faded. “Impermanence -- that too was temporary. All is change.”

Suddenly she looked on the verge of tears. “What does it mean?”

Awakening

“The world is full of suffering. All is change. All is impermanent. You *know* this now,” he whispered.

She frowned again and sighed.

“What did you learn from that,” she nodded to the bowl.

“Just an exercise,” he said with a smile. “Join me for yoga?”

She smiled a bit. “Sure -- I can move around!”

Rob started them out slow. Carol was in good condition, flexible with core strength. Soon she was more relaxed, even laughing occasionally. She was surprised to see him settle into splits so easily, and dismayed she couldn’t get down all the way any more, after doing them for years. “All is change,” he told her again.

Carol practiced with him for about an hour. Then she sat and watched as he continued, going through a series of things, not moving fast, but not moving slowly, either. After a few minutes she could see that he was sweating, but looking at his face, that far-away look, the slight smile, like he was at the beach or something! He finally started calling out seated postures to her; she took them as she watched.

He finally did a series of shoulder and headstands, lotus, and called for a towel as he was in downward facing dog. She moved, tossing him a towel. From there he moved to his back on the towel and invited her to lie in savasana, corpse pose, on the floor or on the bed, for a few minutes. She decided to lie on the floor.

Flat on the floor like that, she could feel a slight vibration, and something that felt like footsteps?

Eight

Rob was drying off in the shower when he heard the chime sound again. He saw Carol go to the table. He reached outside the shower enclosure and got clean shorts and shirt, pulling them on.

“That looks encouraging!” he said as he stepped to the table. The screen had a visual lunch menu, and Carol was clicking on things.

When she was finished, she pushed the mouse to Rob. He clicked on his picture, then clicked on selections -- turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, separate green salad.

“Doesn’t look like we’re going to go hungry, at least,” he offered.

“You’re not vegetarian?” Carol asked.

Rob gave her a shocked look. “Nope! Omnivore!” Looking around, “Wonder how this is going to arrive?”

A few minutes later, they heard some rumbling in one of the cabinets, and a chime sounded.

Opening the cabinet revealed two trays with their respective lunches. Rob took out Carol’s and handed it to her, then retrieved his. Each tray had a container of Gatorade.

After a leisurely lunch, they put the trays back into the cabinet.

Carol sat back in the chair with a big sigh. “Now what?”

Rob stifled a laugh. “Did your family have dogs when you were growing up?”

“Yeah,” she said, a quizzical look on her face.

“What did the dog do before dinner?”

“Slept in his chair.”

“And what did he do after dinner?”

She smiled and nodded. “Went back to his chair.”

“Ours would occasionally run out to the back yard to bark like mad and chase off something. That and scratch, the occasional trip to the water dish, or to the yard to pee. But most of the time they flaked out on a rug or in their beds. We had one that loved to lay in the sun -- she’d move every so often, tracking the sun as it moved across the floor.”

Awakening

Carol smiled.

Rob stretched. "So I'm going to work on my hips some, slowly, then sit in meditation for a while. Maybe do some more vigorous yoga before dinner."

"What are they going to do to us?" Carol asked quietly.

Rob shook his head. "I have no idea. Maybe we're in transit to where things happen. Maybe they're just waiting, or maybe it has started. No idea."

He stood up and took the still-damp towel off the towel bar. Looking up at the ceiling, he called out, "Maybe you bozos can cough up my yoga mat -- it was in the same bag as the shampoo."

Yoga, meditation, dinner, meditation. At a quarter to ten on the clock, the light in the ceiling dimmed. "Subtle hint, that," Rob remarked, rolling to hands and knees. He got toothpaste and toothbrush from his drawer and went to the sink.

Carol used the toilet as he brushed his teeth and washed his face. They swapped places.

Standing by the bed, Carol looked at Rob. "Ah, about this..."

Rob smiled. "How old are you?"

She tilted her head a bit. "Twenty four, why?"

Rob shook his head a bit. "I could be your father. You'll be safe; I promise."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Fifty five," he replied.

She looked surprised. "I would have guessed more like 40!"

He laughed. "You're still safe..."

She turned more serious. "Please hold me?" she whispered.

"Of course," he whispered back.

When they got into bed, the lights went to a very dim level, with the panel in the shower a little brighter as a night light. Rob relaxed on his back, and Carol curled up at his side. He put an arm around her, and she snuggled closer.

He closed his eyes, letting the tears roll down.

Nine

Beep Beep Beep

Rob opened his eyes to a loud beeping sound, pushing up on his hands -- he was naked! So was Carol next to him, also waking up!

“Oh shit,” he said, looking up. They were in a cylindrical chamber maybe eight feet in diameter and seven feet high. The walls were lined with curved ferrite plates, like in an anechoic chamber. The floor was ferrite-covered, with a cloth pad. But at the top of the chamber...

Illuminating the chamber was a malevolently glowing yellow hemisphere, three or so feet in diameter, behind a clear cover, surrounded by more ferrite plates. Or were they graphite?

“What is *that*?” Carol cried, moving closer.

“I think we’re gonna find out,” Rob told her.

The yellow orb glowed brighter, humming, almost spitting. The humming got louder and louder, the noise changing from occasional spitting to a continuous crackling.

And with that glowing and crackling came unimaginable pain. They screamed and cried, collapsing to the floor, licked by the crackling yellow glow.

Rob managed to cover his eyes -- that helped, a little. “Cover your eyes!” he managed to cry.

The torment went on and on -- he managed to turn on to his stomach, hoping that would help.

Now his spine was on fire, torment lighting up his spine and spreading through every part of his body. He tried, he tried to roll to his back once again, but couldn’t.

The torment went on and on, both of them screaming.

Until blackness took them again.

Ten

Carol pushed herself up on her arms with a gasp -- she was back in the room again, in bed, and Rob was beside her.

She gasped and touched him, shook him. "Rob! Rob!" He was pale, almost gray. "Rob! Are you all right?" she called out. She was trying to remember anything from first aid classes so long ago when he took a gasping breath and shook, ending up on his side, gasping more. She fell on him and held him, crying.

After a couple of minutes he rolled to his back and held her. They were both naked. He held her and she cried. "What was that horrible thing?" she sobbed.

"I have no idea," he managed to say.

A while later, Carol sat up. "I need to pee," she told him, moving out of bed, grabbing shorts and a t-shirt.

"Water, please?" asked Rob.

"Sure."

After she sat on the toilet, she went to the sink. On a whim, she opened the little refrigerator under the counter. "There's Gatorade here -- would that be better?" There were six or eight bottles in there! She took one for herself, opened it, and quickly drank about half.

"Yes, please!" said Rob.

She took one back to him. She had to help him sit up. "You look like shit," she told him, opening the bottle and handing it to him.

"Thanks," he whispered in reply. He took a few tentative swallows, then downed about a third of the bottle. "I've felt better." He gradually finished off the rest. Carol took the empties and put them in the sink.

As she did, Rob moved on all fours to the floor, doing cat-cow rolls, flexing his spine. "I feel stiff," he explained, moving slowly with his breath.

"You've got ... blisters on your back," Carol told him, gently touching one."

Rob paused. "Small? Big? Where?" he asked.

"Small, freckle sized, along both sides of your spine, yeah, like in lines on both sides, from your neck down to your tail."

Awakening

“I made the mistake of rolling to my stomach,” Rob told her. “That was a whole lot worse -- whatever it is, it acts on nerves. Putting a forearm over my eyes helped my eyes, and I think, my head, but it didn’t do my hand and arm any good.”

“God, that was horrible; why did they do that to us?”

Rob shook his head.

They managed a light lunch; Rob didn’t finish his. He was twitchy and weak, and spent part of the afternoon doing slow, easy yoga. Carol followed along, watching him closely. They both drank more Gatorade.

A light dinner, more Gatorade, more slow yoga, and they both went to bed early, a little after eight. A few moments after they crawled into bed, the room lights went dim.

Carol moved closer to Rob. Tentative at first, soon they were clutching each other.

Eleven

Carol woke to the beeping again. “No!” she cried out, desperately looking for a way out of their cylindrical torture chamber.

“On your back!” Rob yelled.

“What?”

“On your back! Now!” he yelled at her, pushing her to her back. “Arms at your sides! Turn your head! Now!”

The humming and spitting started as the yellow orb glowed brighter.

And then Rob lay down on top of her, facing up! The humming and spitting got louder and louder, but she only felt it along parts of her legs and feet -- he was protecting her with his body! She heard him scream and cry, and felt him shake on top of her. She felt wet, knowing he’d peed on her. She reached out to move him off her, so she could do the same, protect him, but as soon as her hands and arms were exposed, it was like they were on fire again, and trying to move them just made it worse, extending the fire up through her body.

His screaming and twitching continued, and he slid off her to one side.

Now she was in agony as well. She managed to throw an arm over her eyes, and tried to cover his with her other arm as well.

Twelve

Carol woke up screaming. Not from the pain, but from the memory of the pain. She sat up on the bed, naked.

As bad as Rob looked the previous day, now he looked worse! “Rob,” she sobbed, poking him gingerly. So gray... “Rob!” she called, louder.

She remembered -- tilt the head back, squeeze the nose closed, and breathe! She took a deep breath, tilted his head back and pinched his nose closed, put her mouth over his, and blew into him. Part way through her breath, he twitched and she pulled back. He took a breath with a gasp. He took another, raising a hand. She took his hand in hers. He squeezed her hand, not very strongly, and took another breath. She held on. “Breathe, Rob!” she cried.

It took a while for his gasping to turn into deep breathing, and then to settle into more normal breathing. She held his hand, watching him gradually turn pink.

When he opened his eyes and even managed a small smile she hugged him close. “You protected me,” she said, “You protected me...”

Rob managed to put an arm around her. He tried to take full, complete breaths.

More Gatorade, more rest, and Carol was more worried, because he ate less at lunch. She made him drink more, and that seemed to help. Both of them were twitchy. But the yoga in the afternoon helped. He ate more at dinner, they spent more time on the floor, and once more went to bed early.

This time, Carol was holding on to him before the lights even went dim.

Thirteen

Rob woke to beeping. His heart took off racing as he shook his head and sat up. He was in the chamber, alone! Up on his knees, he looked at and touched the curved wall. If those plates were graphite, they'd be really thick. But if they were ferrite... He drew back his right hand, and with a grunt, stuck out -- just like breaking blocks in a Shotokan studio as a teen, he thought. And a corner broke off! Less than a quarter of an inch thick! He struck at an adjacent corner. No dice. Next to it, and it cracked, a bigger piece fell off. Opposite, it broke. The one that hadn't, he tried again, and a corner broke, exposing a circular area with spots of foam cementing the ferrites in place, and a cable! He pulled hard on the cable, exposing it, pulling it into the chamber as much as possible.

But the humming and crackling was getting louder and louder.

He turned and managed to crack one more plate before his muscles gave out and he collapsed to the bottom of the chamber. Before he covered his eyes, he thought he saw and heard wild arcs. Things smelled different.

Fourteen

Carol woke with a start, pushing herself up and turning to Rob. He was breathing, not looking as bad -- but it looked like he was sunburned? Yeah, it looked like part of his body was sunburned! How? “Rob, Rob -- talk to me, please,” she said emotionally.

He took a deep breath through his nose, and let it out. Another deep, controlled breath.

He opened his eyes and smiled.

She fell on top of him and hugged him. “I was so worried -- I woke up in that thing alone! They did us separately?”

“Yes, but I don’t think they’ll be doing us again for a while,” he whispered, putting his arms around her.

“Why not?” she asked, pulling away and sitting up.

“I damaged the inside of the chamber,” he told her.

“You did? How? With what?”

He held up his right hand, flexing the wrist. “Don’t think I hurt myself... The walls are covered in thin curved plates -- and they’re brittle. I cracked a few, broke off some chunks. Exposed a wire. Things sounded a lot different.”

She nodded. “So that explains the sunburn?” she asked.

When he frowned, she held both his arms up; one looked red, the other normal.

“Wow,” he whispered.

“Along part of your body, like a sunburn, red but not blistered.”

“Help me sit up?”

Carol helped him. “You look a lot better this morning, considering...”

Rob took an experimental breath. Looking at his arms, torso, and legs, “I think that’s going to sting... Maybe they had to cut things short? I hope so. I heard some wild noises...”

“Something to drink?”

“Please,” he agreed.

Awakening

Rob definitely felt stronger. After some fluids, they did light yoga, and then sat in meditation.

It was different this morning. More than just success in the chamber, Rob thought, he felt different.

Back to the breath at the nostril... A feeling of ... expansion ... that feeling of closeness, almost claustrophobic, dark, cold, surrounded by water? Letting things expand, two people, to men nearby. Watching them? He could *feel* them, sense them...

But he could also sense one closer, much closer... Carol, sitting across from him... So young, so firm and delicious... He could sense her warmth, her presence, and her concern. He could sense his body awakening to her... And why not? For the first time in a long time he opened himself to those feelings, breathing deep, letting his sense of her grow stronger.

He opened his eyes and saw Carol looking at him, an unsure look on her face. He smiled, taking her in with all his senses, feeling his body respond. Looking at her, feeling her, he saw and felt her body respond as well, her nipples tightening under her t-shirt, a motion of her torso, her nostrils flaring. Taking another deep, slow breath, he smelled her arousal.

He opened his arms to her.

Carol smiled. She moved closer, extending a hand and reaching forward to touch the tent in his boxers. When he smiled more, she slipped off her t-shirt and boxers, and started moving them to the bed...

Fifteen

Blaine smiled, looking at the displays. "Doctor Widgit," he called to his colleague in the tiny monitoring room, "I believe we are about to observe the procedure known as gettin' boned."

Widgit, who's real name was Widjikovsky, replied, "Bout damn time."

Blaine was one of the group's medical doctors, a neurologist. Widgit was one of the Ph.D. particle physicists, one of the ones responsible for The Beast. But those positions didn't exempt them from time in the Box, monitoring the subjects. They sat together in the monitoring room, more of a closet, in front of multiple displays showing the subjects in the containment area, each with one hand on a safety switch at all times. If either of them released their switch, the emitter in the containment area would render the subjects unconscious.

"Blaine," Widgit pondered out loud, scanning the various displays, "Explain to me how those two are alive?" Widgit knew -- time in The Beast was fatal. He'd seen it. A three hundred pound sow lived thirty seconds at full power. Rats exploded in twenty. Yet these two had survived a minute at full power the first time, another round at a minute but the woman was covered for the first part, and the last round, she got the full two.

Widgit shook his head. And doing the guy right after her, he broke some of the absorber plates and exposed a sense line. The Beast flashed over at about fifty seconds, shutting down with major damage. And the bastard survived the flash-over!

"I have no idea -- they're not like the rest of us, bro, that's for sure. Maybe the drugs we've been pushing into them, in the air they're breathing?"

Widgit frowned and shook his head. "Porcine runs used the same protocols, ham sandwiches in thirty seconds; apes not even that long, but longer than the human volunteers."

Blaine nodded with a sour look. "Any hope of reviving The Beast?"

Widgit shook his head again. "Not out here. We said all along we needed a way to monitor the chamber, and to short-cycle it... We've got replacement plates, but the flash-over took out the klystron, at least. Doug thinks it damaged the waveguides -- he's checking. I'll take a look when I get off shift here. It's a good bet the exciter is hosed as well."

"Bummer," Blaine commiserated.

"Yeah. Even if we had a new klystron and the waveguides, we don't have the physical space to do the work. And we won't know if the target has been damaged until we can get a good look at it, and that has to be done in a shielded environment. How the hell did our boy survive the flash-over? Damn -- we focus megajoules into that target assembly..."

"Like I said; not like us, bro... I thought you said the hard pulse from the flash-over was orthogonal to the target beam?" Blaine asked.

Widgit nodded. “Hey -- here we go -- display three. Wow, he’s in good shape! Oh yeah, honey, ride that thing! The hard pulse should be bi-conically orthogonal to the target beam, and to the main axis of the boat as well -- that’s why it’s packaged that way; at least they listened to us on that!”

Blaine smiled as the girl eased herself on to what looked to be a strong, healthy erection. “Damn, mid 50’s and all that time in The Beast! He’s alive enough to get it up! And oh what a sweet place to put it! Give her a good one for me!”

But after rocking into position, both of them closed their eyes, holding each other, sitting quietly. “That sure as hell ain’t human!” Widgit called out. “Would have been real ugly if that pulse had gone through the reactor core,” he mused.

Blaine shuddered. “Jesus -- hadn’t thought of that!”

Widgit watched the display looking for action. “Well, *we* did, and that’s why we forced ‘em to build it like that. They bitched about the orientation of the klystron taking up too much room until we explained the X-rays coming off the anode, and any pulses. Positioning it like that with a beveled anode sends the X-rays straight up and like I said, any pulses bi-conically out the sides. But if you want the thing short, we can do it, it’s just that any nasties go up the main axis of your boat. When we rebuild it, maybe they’ll let us put in short-cycle controls, at least some optical fibers to view the chamber, and the plastic baffle protection.”

“Think the target is okay?”

“No clue. Can’t check it. Doug is working the data, but we don’t know what the hell happened in the flash-over; it fried a lot of our measurement gear.”

Blaine shook his head. “Any word on changes to the plan?”

“I’m a mushroom, too,” Widgit complained. “But wasn’t it your guy’s model, run them through two cycles in The Beast, and wait five days to see what hatches?”

“Yup,” Blaine confirmed. “And we’ve done that, so we could just hang around and see, or head back to San Diego. Worst case, what would rebuild be for The Beast?”

Widgit sighed. “Doug and I have been talking -- that’s what *she* wants to know stat. We can rebuild the chamber and the klystron line in 24 hours given the room to work and the parts. But if the target is for shit, that’s a month at least by Hanford to grow a new one? And we categorically do *not* have the facilities to evaluate the integrity of the target. Call it a day to verify the target -- mostly setting up containment, opening it up, and re-sealing it again without killing anybody.”

“It’s still pretty amazing that he managed to take it down?”

Awakening

Widgit frowned. “Don’t go there -- all along we’ve made requests to line the chamber, and given them multiple warnings that the plates are brittle and need protection. And so did the subcontractor who made the damn plates! An early porcine run -- were you with us then? Sow stepped on a corner of a plate and cracked it, causing a huge motherfucking arc -- instant bacon - - and the back pulse quenched the undulator magnet. Fucking mess. So they threw a cotton fucking pad on the bottom and left the sides which are thinner and more brittle un-fucking-protected.”

Blaine smiled. “I started just after that, but I heard about it. That’s why I asked, wondering why they didn’t do anything about it.”

“Two dollar canary,” muttered Widgit.

“Say what?”

“What’s a two dollar canary say? Cheep, cheep, cheep!”

Blaine chuckled. “I like it. A few million for a target with a half-life of a year, right? But they won’t drop a few hundred for some plastic.”

“That’s about it. Typical.”

Sixteen

Rob breathed deep, feeling Carol's weight, feeling himself deep within her. Eyes closed again, that feeling of expansion. The two men nearby, a few more. That feeling of being enclosed, surrounded again, so cold and dark. And she was so warm and tight... More people -- arguing about the chamber, they called it The Beast -- they couldn't repair it! Looking into the mind of a physicist and seeing the structure of the device -- it showered them with radiation, subatomic particles, but why? He continued exploring nearby minds.

Carol felt him inside her, so warm, so good. But something else -- other feelings. Feeling him, something about his mind, following him. To other people! She could ... sense, almost see them! A doctor and a scientist, watching them! More people, arguing -- he did it, he disabled it! They couldn't fix it!

She let her mind drift farther, to a larger group of people, of men -- they were in a submarine? Why? Why were they doing this to them? As the questions swirled and filled her mind, the sense of expansion faded. She did something, stepping back, that nose thing, focus on the breath at the nostril, breath at the nostril, letting things expand again. It was tricky!

A woman on board! Another woman! But so cold, so focused!

Turning away from that woman, back to Rob, Carol was aware of her hips moving slightly, of the way he felt inside her. She took a deep breath, eyes closed feeling the smile spread over her face. She pushed Rob to his back, hands on his shoulders. She smiled more at his sigh, letting her hips move more.

Rob sighed, on his back, she felt so good. He let go, letting things happen.

Carol felt him more, felt him all around her, inside her, so good. Reaching out, feeling him more... Suddenly she was taking him in, drinking him in, drinking in his life, his experiences, his knowledge. It made her dizzy for a moment; she held on to his shoulders more. And that contact increased the intimacy, the coupling; she was feeling both sides, not just the feeling of having him hot and hard inside her, but *his* feeling, the way he felt his cock inside her.

Seventeen

“Ho dog, home stretch,” Widgit called to Blaine, watching the pair on the displays.

“Oh, that do look good, so nice and slow,” Blaine moaned in agreement.

Eighteen

As Carol moved slowly, she felt their connection increase. But as it did, she felt ... differences in his body. One area feeling different than another, one leg different than the other, one leg bone different from the other. She did something, pushing or smoothing from deep inside, something to make it better, to make him better. It helped; she could feel it, and knowing she was helping, healing him, stirred something deep in her. She did it more, part of his left leg, from the center of the bone out, healing, making it better.

But as she did, she felt something else, like being tired, that feeling from running as far and as fast as you could. But she had so much more of him to help! She couldn't stop now!

In the distance, far yet close to them, she felt it -- energy, a warm buzzing glow, something she could use. She took a breath, raising her head, eyes still closed, filling herself with that energy, using it to heal him. She smiled as she exhaled, guiding the flow, using it, drawing it through herself and into him, healing and filling him. After a few breaths, it was so easy -- like watering plants with a hose, directing the flow.

Nineteen

Wallace looked at his reactor and generator displays, looked again, then keyed his microphone. “ENG ENG for XO,” he called, frowning.

“XO here, whatcha got?” came the reply.

“Our guests are pulling an extra thirty kW -- they announce anything?”

“Confirmed; I’ll check and see if I can get them to admit to the day of the week,” the XO replied. “What was their peak last time?”

Wallace tapped the buttons below a different display. “Three decimal two megawatts peak the last run, with the same one decimal twenty one megawatt average prior to the spike.”

“Thirty kw hardly worth mentioning. I’ll ask. Looks steady at that level.”

Wallace nodded. “Thanks, XO.”

“Keep us updated, ENG. XO out.”

Twenty

Doug slid down the ladder shaking his head. The big klystron was toast and the waveguides had gotten hot enough at nodal points to deform. And he hadn't grabbed the right sized ...

Red lights came on and an alarm sounded -- he dropped to the deck. What the hell?

When he realized he was still alive a few seconds later, verifying visually that exciter and klystron power were locked out, he retrieved the wired status panel he'd dropped. He started flipping through screens. No radiation, no particle tracks -- he just might live! When The Beast was live, the access area he was in was flooded with lethal radiation.

"What the hell?" he said, looking at a screen. An energy leak in the undulator magnet? A drain of 34kW, with zero beam current? "What the hell?" he repeated.

He had a bad thought, a *very* bad thought... He fished for the speaker-mic connected to the radio clipped to his belt. And swore, because the hatch was closed behind him, making the area RF tight.

He crawled backwards on the deck, staying as low as possible, until he got to the hatch. The red warning lights were still flashing and the alarm still sounding. But the power supplies were locked out, beam current on the lower peg, zero! Exciters off and the klystron cold!

He took a breath and took a chance, reaching up to slap the hatch release, pushing it open, and rolling out.

Hands grasped him, pulling him away from the hatch and re-sealing it.

"What's going on?" asked Pete, one of the engineers who grabbed him.

Doug shook out his hands. "Don't know! You look at the screens?"

Pete nodded and repeated, "What's going on? Don't make sense!"

"No shit. Where's Widgit?"

"His turn in the barrel," Arnold, the other engineer who helped pull Doug out, replied.

"Even better," said Doug, grabbing his speaker-mic again. "Widgit Widgit this is Doug priority."

"Protocol -- fuck off, I'm in the box," came the reply.

"Screw protocol -- what are they doing -- we're leaking 34kW through the undulator with zero beam current, the exciter locked out, and the big bulb is cold."

“Say what?” Widgit replied over the radio.

Doug looked at the status panel Pete was holding. “34kW through the undulator, zero beam current, exciter locked out, and a very cold *very* dead klystron! What are they doing in there?”

“She’s on top of him screwing his brains out, nice and slow like,” came Widgit’s reply.

“What’s he doing?”

“Laying there enjoying it,” Blaine threw in.

“This is Doctor Russell,” interrupted a cold and formal woman’s voice. “Comply with protocols! Observers check multispectral displays.”

Doug made a face. So did Pete and Arnold.

“Physics, undulator status!” demanded Russell over the radio.

Doug smiled as he keyed the mic. “Forbidden by protocol,” he said and let go of the button. With his other hand he flipped the bird in the direction of Russell’s command room.

“Physics, I want undulator status!” Russell repeated.

“Forbidden by protocol; available on phys status page three,” he replied with a big smile and another bird. Pete patted him on the back. Arnold looked astounded. “What’s she gonna do,” Doug said to Arnold, “fire me and make me walk home?”

“Physics! Why is undulator power nonzero?” Russell demanded.

Doug shook his head, astounded at the question. “I have no idea!” he replied in his mic.

“This reading for real? What do the mains say?” Doug asked the two engineers.

Pete was holding up another panel, showing a different status page. “Looks accurate to me.”

Doug sighed. “Well guys, this pig is not gonna fly anytime soon. Let’s pop the mains.”

Pete raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, I’ll request permission first,” Doug said with a grin.

“Okay, boss,” Pete replied with the half-assed hand motion they used for a salute.

Twenty One

Carol had a good rhythm, a good flow, drawing in warmth and spreading it through Rob, healing him. And she noticed some spots in herself that could use it as well. She spread the energy through herself, filling them both up.

That done, she took another breath and put more into the motion of her hips.

Rob moaned underneath her. She smiled, breathing deep, focusing and relaxing at the same time. She could feel both of them getting close, oh so close...

Twenty Two

“ENG to XO -- our guests are back to nominal,” Wallace reported.

“This is XO, thanks -- payload haven’t acknowledged the question yet.”

“ENG,” Wallace acknowledged. He’d be happier when those clowns were off the boat.

The XO was thinking much the same thing.

Twenty Three

“Physics recommending we disconnect the particle physics subsystem at primary feed,” Doug said over his radio.

He smiled broadly and put a hand up to his right ear.

One of the medical docs, Morrow, walked up and took Doug’s radiation monitoring clips from his lanyard and pushed them into a reader.

Pete called out, “Undulator power on the bottom peg again.”

“This is Doctor Russell. Disconnect generator physics subsystem at primary feed.”

Doug smiled. “You heard the ... lady!” he called to the engineers, pointing off to a panel.

Pete shook his head, grinning. He picked up his microphone. “Engineering disconnecting generator at primary feed; will acknowledge when complete.”

“Thank you, Engineering,” came a cold recognition over the radio.

“Physics, report to command immediately,” her voice rang out again.

Doug frowned, but Morrow picked up his radio. “This is Doctor Morrow. Do you want him before or after decon check?”

Doug gave him a look of concern.

Morrow smiled. “You’re clean -- it will give her time to cool down.”

“Thanks, doc,” Doug said.

“Give her time to get pissed at someone else,” Arnold grumbled.

“Got *that* right, son,” Morrow confirmed.

“After you have cleared him, Doctor Morrow, please. Russell out,” the radio signaled.

Doug and Morrow smiled. Morrow asked, “Did he really break it?”

Doug nodded. “Oh yeah.”

Twenty Four

Rob held Carol's hips, feeling so good, so relaxed, enjoying it so much.

Getting close, so close, breathing deep, moaning, letting his body do what it needed to do, coming, pulsing deep into her, feeling her come as well, the feeling so strong, so close and intimate.

Carol held on, her hips still moving, feeling like they were one person, not two... So good, so satisfying, so fulfilling, even as some of it was fading. But she knew what he needed, and what she needed. Opening her eyes, she looked down, leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. He looked so good now, so relaxed and so good.

She moved, snagging the towel she'd dragged to the bed with them, and pulled him closer as she reclined, attaching him to a nipple and sliding a hand behind his head.

She kissed Rob on the forehead once more, then sighed and let her eyes close, holding him close, relaxing, letting go, letting her mind expand again.

She drifted over the crew working with The Beast -- they were powering it down. As she looked through their minds, she understood the physics involved! She understood, but why, how? Following two of the men, one of them a medical doctor, the other a physicist, she looked deeper into the physicist and that expansive feeling swept over her again, like a wave crashing over her, suddenly taking him in, swallowing his mind.

Twenty Five

Walking down the corridor, Doug suddenly felt like the bottom dropped out of the world. He grabbed for something to hold on to as he collapsed.

Morrow caught the physicist as he was falling, bracing him against a wall of the narrow corridor. "Medic!" he called out, as they were near his office. "Medic!"

As one of his assistants rushed up, he felt the physicist straighten up a little.

"You okay" Morrow asked.

Doug held on to the doc's arm. "Wooo... I thought so; now I'm not so sure."

"Let's get you inside. I don't care what she says, you're mine for a while."

"Not gonna argue, doc!" Doug agreed weakly.

Twenty Six

Carol floated, letting all the new information simmer and integrate. She now knew a lot more about *what*, but still not *why* -- The Beast, the machine, drove particles into a complex target, showering them with even more complex radiation.

The feeling of vastness, of expansion contracted suddenly as Carol experienced memories of testing -- of animals, and of people, dying from exposure to The Beast. Dying quickly, painfully after short exposures -- yet she and Rob had survived? How? Why?

She turned to holding him close, letting the feelings center her once more.

Rob woke up, still in Carol's arms, still at her breast. A chime in the distance -- a split second of panic -- relaxing as she moved his head around and kissed his forehead. So comforting... "We can pick lunch, if you want," she whispered to him.

He took a deep breath and gave her a squeeze, enjoying very much where he was.

But they got up and went to the table, clicking on the screen to select lunch. Carol went first. She was surprised at how hungry she was, and even more surprised at how hungry Rob was!

She went to the little refrigerator and took out two bottles of Gatorade, handing one to him.

But as she approached, he stood, hugging and kissing her.

They flowed together, holding, feeling, and kissing.

When they stopped, both were smiling.

"You look so much better!" Carol told him, looking him over. He'd been gray, blotchy earlier. Now he looked so healthy!

"So do you," Rob growled, entirely on a different wavelength.

Carol chuckled and sat down.

Rob sighed and did the same, opening the bottle and downing about half of it.

Carol did the same.

"I feel a whole lot better, thank you," Rob agreed. He put a hand on the table, extended to her.

Awakening

She held his hand in hers. She understood so much more now! She knew the so-called door wasn't really the door to their confinement; he'd spotted the paint on the hinges, paint that was solid, unblemished. If those hinges had ever been used, the paint would be cracked where the two pieces met. She understood and agreed with his guess it had to be the shower.

But why?

"What is it?" Rob asked, seeing the distanced look of concentration, of thought on Carol's face.

She shook her head, returning to smiling again, still holding his hand. "Why? Why us, why here, why are they doing what they're doing?"

Rob shook his head. "Doesn't make sense -- which means we're missing some big pieces to the puzzle."

Another chime sounded -- their lunches had arrived.

Carol retrieved them. They ate heartily.

"And now?" Carol asked with a smile (and tightening nipples) after she'd returned the trays to the cabinet.

Rob nodded. "I'm for sitting on the floor in meditation, then some yoga, and after that, maybe a nap?"

Carol smiled. "Couldn't we sit on the bed in meditation?" she suggested.

Rob smiled a bit more. "We're less likely to get distracted sitting on the floor..."

Carol stuck out her tongue briefly, but got towels for them to sit on.

This time Rob sat them back to back, hips touching.

Twenty Seven

Widgit pulled up a chair next to the bunk Doug occupied in medical. “Hey, how ya doing?” he asked, concerned.

Doug moved his head side to side, still laying in the bunk. “Not sure -- thought I was fine, but then I folded on the way over here. Doc says my tags are clean, but wants me to stick around. I feel okay, I think.”

Widgit nodded. “She wants me to report back on how you’re doing,” he offered.

“That’s surprising,” Doug replied.

From behind them, Morrow called out, “If you die, she has to fill out *mucho* paperwork.”

Widgit chuckled.

Doug nodded. “Yeah -- makes sense. So what’s happening? Any decisions?”

Widgit shrugged. “Her recommendation to the Powers what Be is to head to Bangor.”

“Washington? Not back to San Diego?” Doug queried. That’s where they’d embarked.

“Anything on the target has to be done at the Hanford lab, right? Bangor is closer and easier for the target. The rest of the rebuild we can do anywhere, right? Just give us the parts, duct tape, the room, and our Swiss Army knives...”

Doug chuckled. “Yeah, right... But that is the way they think...”

Widgit asked, “How’s the big bulb and the waveguides?”

“The bulb is for shit, and the waveguides got hot enough to sag. If we’d run them with a vacuum like some of those clowns wanted, it would have been a bigger mess.”

Widgit nodded. “What was that shit with the undulator?”

Doug shook his head. “Beats hell out of me! I needed a different socket wrench when all hell breaks loose -- red lights and alarms. I hit the deck figuring I was cooked for sure, and when I looked at status, the undulator is drawing about 35kW! With zero beam current, the exciter locked out, and the big bulb cold! You tell me how that happens!”

Widgit let out a low whistle. “No clue, bro! And he was flat on his back with missy giving him the slow grind to paradise!”

“Wish I coulda been there. You know we pulled the plug.”

Awakening

Widgit nodded. “Yeah. That was my first recommendation to her this morning after flashover, before you even popped the hatch.”

“Bitch,” Doug muttered. If they’d done that, the undulator would have been unpowered when he went in.

Widgit just smiled. “I thought we’d need a new bulb and plumbing; I’ll give them confirmation.” He turned to Morrow. “Hey Doc -- with The Beast down for the count, we’re cleared to use the Officer’s Mess -- can I drag him along?”

Morrow looked up from his little desk. “He still needs qualified medical monitoring -- I’m coming too!”

“If we sagged the waveguides, how did the undulator do?” Widgit asked.

Doug shook his head, sitting up and putting his shoes back on. “Beats hell out of me. That’s what I was gonna do with the socket, pull the matching section and have a look. That draw was too low for operation, and way too long for a quench event. Doesn’t make sense.”

“Lots of things on this deal don’t make sense,” Widgit muttered.

“And it’s not our job to understand them, gentlemen,” the doc reminded them. “Let’s get lunch before someone starts asking more questions.”

As Doug stood up, helped by Widgit, he sighed, “I bow to superior wisdom!”

Twenty Eight

Russell sat in her tiny cabin and fumed. The insolence of those two! Preliminary reports from the two physicists were that the particle generator was disabled and could not be repaired with the facilities available. They stubbornly refused to answer the simple question of whether or not the target assembly was damaged! Insolence!

She shook her head. Insolence and yet genius -- the two of them had taken a design that more than filled two basketball courts at Y-lab and collapsed it into a package twelve feet on a side, and done it in under three months -- including fitting it into the sub's payload bay.

She looked at the display showing the subjects again. Sitting back-to-back on the floor. They'd survived the initial irradiation. That alone proved they were different. But would they blossom, would they change? When? To what?

She mused about the original incident, one man, a technician, surviving. Surviving, and then like the butterfly emerging from the chrysalis, turning into ... what? A god? A being powerful enough to escape those fools' so-called confinement facility. And, she was sure, he somehow caused the "accident" which had destroyed part of Y-lab, rendering the remainder hopelessly contaminated.

Better than the others, she mused. The rumors - reports out of the Eastern bloc were that an "accident" had taken down a deep black research facility at Sarov a few months ago. Who else was following along the same path? The Chinese? Based on numbers, they were the most likely to succeed. Indians didn't have the technology.

Being in a virtual communications blackout, bandwidth so limited, hurt. She wanted updates on how those other fools were doing. Had they really shut down their program, internally as well as in the field, once they'd taken the subjects away? Fools, they didn't know what they were dealing with!

She sighed, closing her eyes and leaning her head back for a moment. A fleeting vision, a dream, of *her* stepping out of the chamber, glowing and godlike, raising a hand and...

Eyes snapping open -- or had they changed already? She brought up the recordings, superimposing them, visual of the subjects overlaid with the power anomaly. Pathetic, humping like animals... Even running it in slow motion, she couldn't detect any shifts in behavior or motion coincident with the energy drain, or with its termination. Still, the last report they'd gotten out of those fools, they experienced a sudden energy drain as their subject disappeared.

She picked up her intercom handset. "This is Doctor Russell; Get me the Executive Officer, please."

"This is the XO."

Awakening

“Good afternoon; this is Doctor Russell. Have you experienced any sudden or unexplained power surges or drains?”

The XO smiled. “I’ll check and get back to you.” He gave her the same response he’d received from her on numerous occasions. Sauce for the goose...

Russell fumed. “This is important, Lieutenant; sudden or unexplained power drains represent a threat to the safety and security of your ship and all onboard!”

The XO nodded. “One moment please.” He quickly conferenced in the Captain.

“Captain,” the XO said, “Doctor Russell from the payload team reporting that sudden or unexplained power surges or drains represent a threat to the safety and security of the boat and crew, Sir. Is that correct, Doctor Russell?”

Russell said, “That is correct young man. We want...”

The XO interrupted. “Captain, I recommend quarantining the payload and going to security status Bravo three.”

“Agreed and approved,” the Captain replied, “Make it so, XO. Take us to Bravo three and be ready to convince me why we shouldn’t go to Bravo two.”

Russell sat back, startled. What was going on?

The XO picked up his IMC microphone and hit the button for shipwide paging. “This is the Executive Officer. Payload area is quarantined until further notice. Go to alert status Bravo three. Repeating, payload area quarantined, going to Bravo three. Acknowledge when positions are manned. XO out.”

“XO, do you want the outer doors armed?” came the question over his headset.

“Not at this time,” he replied with a smile. A preparatory step for emergency jettisoning the contents of the payload bay was to arm the explosive bolts on the outer doors, and part of Bravo two.

“Young man, what did you do!” accosted Russell.

“Responded to your warning, Doctor Russell. Do you have anything else?”

Russell slammed down the phone.

The XO laughed. Then he punched his intercom panel and called out, “ENG ENG this is XO.”

“ENG here. What’s up?”

Awakening

“Our payload may have issues. Add to your list for Bravo -- if you see so much as a twitch on your boards, we need to know about it instantly -- raise hell.”

“Got it, XO -- arm the outer doors?”

The XO chuckled. “Under advisement, ENG. XO out.”

Russell fumed. Now she wouldn't get *any* information from them! And what if that earlier incident had been... If they got the go-ahead to return to port in Washington, that was five days. By protocol, both subjects must be medicated at least two days before reaching port. Medicated, or incapacitated and kept that way until they were in a secure facility...

Yet what did that mean, “secure,” after what the other one had done, escaping somehow from containment. She didn't believe the rumors he'd had help. It was easier to accept that once awakened, they had godlike powers... How would Wyoming be any better?

She shook her head. Should they start medicating now? But the whole idea was to observe these abilities as they expressed, as they developed... Cutting power to the generator may have been a mistake -- it removed a source of energy for them to tap, but it was a source of energy they could monitor! Now, they still had other sources -- oh my God, what if they could tap the sub's atomic reactor directly? Those two had other sources they could possibly tap, but none that she and her people could monitor! Damn!

No, don't medicate them now, but at the first sign of trouble? She looked at her watch, trying to figure out what time it was back on the East Coast, when they could expect an answer on returning to port a few days early. Yes, it was only a few days. Those two couldn't go anywhere; they didn't have anyplace to go! That was the reason behind doing this on a bloody submarine -- on the sea floor out in the middle of nowhere, with a skeleton crew on the sub.

Let things develop. There was nowhere for them to go. All the corridors away from the payload bay, all the corridors leading to hatches, were protected by emitters, always powered up, continuously monitored. They couldn't get out of the module; they couldn't get off the boat. And if they did, where would they go? Should she review the emitter design with one of the engineers? He was supposedly working on cost reduction. Was there a weakness there?

Twenty Nine

“XO, Drake here.”

The XO picked up his microphone. Drake handled Officer’s Mess. “XO, go ahead, Mister Drake.”

“Sorry to bother you, Sir -- we have three payload scientists in the Mess.”

XO nodded. “They hear about the quarantine?”

“Yes, Sir -- and one of them is asking for asylum.”

The XO laughed, as did some of the men around him. “Have them stay in the Mess for now. I’ll take this one up with the Skipper.” He shook his head and looked to his Chief. “Three more nubs for you, Chief.”

The Chief scowled, something he did extremely well. “Wonderful.”

Thirty

Carol needed to move. No, she didn't need to move, she needed to talk to him. But how? She sighed and moved to the side.

Rob opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Come to bed with me -- I need to hold you," she told him.

Rob smiled and nodded. He'd be silly to turn down such an offer.

They moved to the bed. Carol pulled up her t-shirt and opened her arms to him.

Rob slid his arms around her, pulling himself closer, letting go.

Carol sighed as she held him, relaxing, letting go, letting her mind expand again...

The shock as their two minds touched made them both twitch and gasp!

But they tried again, relaxing, expanding, feeling it, feeling it grow.

Their minds merged, flowing together, wrapping around each other as their bodies did. Carol had picked up so much from Russell, the woman leading the project. And Rob had picked up details from Anderson, one of the engineers. Now they both knew what the other knew.

And they knew the clock was ticking. They had to act, and act soon. But how, what?

They started putting together a decision tree. Wait and do nothing, or act. Stay on the boat or leave the boat. Do nothing to the boat, do something to just the project, or do something to the entire boat. Those would seem to be the major decision axes.

They reached out together, reached out for the atomic reactor. They could feel the energy. They knew they could tap it, as Carol had tapped the undulator magnet, but they had so much more available through the reactor. They also knew the reactor was monitored, and anomalies would be reported quickly. That meant whatever they did they'd have to do it fast. But would anomalies be reported back to the project team? Those emitters -- Rob and Carol knew from experience they could be rendered unconscious quickly.

They could reach into the reactor and destroy the ship. Once they started the reaction, it didn't matter what happened to them, it would be unstoppable. But the crew of the ship -- killing them? That didn't feel right. But the people running the project, such as Russell -- they didn't care how many died. They'd killed many people already. But their lack of qualms, their attitude towards the lives of others didn't make it acceptable for the crew to die.

Together they reached out through the ship's crew. There was an emergency jettison for the payload module they were in. Triggering it would take two steps; the first to arm the system

Awakening

overall, and the second to trigger the sequence, which once initiated, could not be stopped. The sequence first blew explosive bolts on the outer payload bay doors. Then it fired the separation charges holding the compartment in the payload bay. The separation charges would also blow the couplings to the payload bay. Rummaging the engineer, Anderson again, a number of subsystems had battery backups. Damn paranoid designers -- cut the main power and the emitters all through the payload bay turned on, running on their own separate backup power.

The emitters were a problem.

But even with the emitters out of the picture, where would they go? How?

Their minds drifted as they held each other, drifted to memories of safety and security.

Carol thought of her parent's house, the room she grew up in. Her mom still kept it the way she'd left it when she moved out to go to UCLA as an undergrad, returning those first two summers. She thought about it ... and she could almost feel it? Together she and Rob held their minds open, increasing the feeling... Could they do it?

Rob thought of a lodge in New Zealand, a place he'd stayed years ago. So safe and serene. He'd been so happy there, happier than any other time in his life. He let the feelings build... Almost there? Could they do it? It didn't feel any "closer" than Carol's place. But they both knew that New Zealand would be a lot safer than the U.S.

It would take energy, they felt it. But they knew where they could tap into a *lot* of energy... And they knew from Russell's memories, others had done it -- disappeared from plain sight, disappeared never to be seen again. So it could be done. They were awakening -- as Russell expected and feared. Something in The Beast was awakening powers within them.

But... But... How could they... How did they...

They'd just have to figure it out. And fast.

They explored more of what Carol had done to Rob, healing him. They'd need to "suck up" a lot of energy to push themselves over the edge to New Zealand. Russell's memories of the one on the East Coast, a couple of months ago, locked in a cell with three people watching him, and he'd disappeared -- there one moment and gone the next.

That man had done it. So could they.

They had to.

Thirty One

The Skipper and his XO huddled in a quiet corner of the bridge.

“Sir, she sounded concerned, even scared -- oh there was the usual bluster and bullying, but something has her spooked,” the XO told his boss.

The Skipper nodded, frowning, hand on his chin. “Not my idea of fun, James,” he agreed. “Your recommendation?”

The XO shook his head. “I’ve already put ENG on alert -- they’ll scream if anything twitches. I’d arm the doors -- bravo two.”

The Skipper raised an eyebrow. “You’d let ‘em walk home?”

“If it’s a choice between them and the boat, the boat wins every time,” the XO said frankly. “Her warning was quite clear.”

The Skipper nodded. He’d listened to the recording of the conversation.

“Do you know what this is about, Sir?” the XO asked.

The Skipper shook his head. “No more than you, I’m afraid -- put their pod in the bay, give them all the power they want, that’s about it. The rest we don’t need to know.” He sighed. “I do not like the way this one feels. Haven’t from the start. Pass the word, quietly, Bravo-2.”

The XO nodded. “Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

Together they walked to another panel. The Skipper pulled a plastic seal off a switch cover, lifted the cover, then pressed and turned a control. A series of lights sequenced from green to orange to red on different panels through the boat. The Skipper closed the cover and pocketed the seal. “We’re betting our fish on this one,” he told his XO, fingering the gold dolphins on his uniform.

The XO said, “Understood, Sir.” He stepped away and started spreading the word.

Thirty Two

Rob and Carol rolled on the bed, kissing. One step closer -- the bolts on the outer doors were armed. Carol, going through one of the boat's engineers, traced the circuitry -- a relay in panel X9331 -- closing the top left relay initiated the sequence. The bolts on the outer doors blew first. Half a second later a second set of bolts blew, releasing ejection cylinders to push the doors free. Then in two tenths of a second intervals, the remaining separation charges went off, ending with the gas canisters that jettisoned the payload bay.

The critical question -- how much time would they have, and how much time would they need? Carol held Rob, rocking them both, trying to maintain the connection between them. No idea how much energy it would take to ... move them. Both of them felt certain, they could do it.

If they only needed a small amount of power, a few kW for a few seconds, it might go unnoticed as within normal operational variation. But if they needed a lot -- the engineer monitoring the nuclear reactor wouldn't change reactor settings unless things got really out of hand, and even then it would take a second or two. They'd have a few seconds before any alarm could be passed back to Russell and the others in the payload bay.

Searching, searching... So many variables...

Eureka! One of the other engineers, the one who worked on the emitters -- there was only one in their room, and it was the thing right above their bed! The other two ceiling mounted things were cameras! And the shower was shielded from the emitter! The metal walls of the shower enclosure blocked the emitter!

They decided. If they could leave without triggering an alarm, that's what they'd do. If they triggered an alarm, they'd trigger the relay to dump the payload module.

But for now, one demonstration of godlike powers was needed...

They held each other tight, hearts accelerating. Rob breathed slow and deep, reaching out for that place in New Zealand again -- remembering it, feeling it. Remembering being there with Catherine, their last trip together. So good, so relaxing, such a happy time.

They could feel it -- as if it was right next to them. It felt like it was going to be easy.

Rob held Carol in his arms, kissing her once more, then opening his eyes. "Shower with me?" he asked, looking in her pretty brown eyes. There was only one way to find out.

Carol looked into his blue eyes. She felt so good in his arms. It was time. "Yes -- scrub my back?"

Rob smiled. "I'd love to."

Awakening

Before showering, both of them used the toilet. Rob started the water going while Carol got clean shirts and shorts for them, hanging them on the towel rack. They got into the shower.

Carol was trying hard not to shake visibly as she got into the shower. She held Rob, and that helped. She held him, closed her eyes, and tried breathing slow and regular. That helped.

Rob held her, feeling her quiver. He knew his own seeming relaxation was the result of years of practice, years of discipline. He could feel his heart racing, and went back to the breath to calm it. That helped. Holding her helped. He held her and kissed the top of her head.

As they held each other, they felt the merge once more, merging together, feeling smaller and larger at the same time, feeling smaller as they merged but with the sensation of vastness around them, sensing the world around them.

Acting together, they filled themselves with the memories of that New Zealand cabin. The sights, the smells, the sounds, as much as they could. And they felt the reactor core, felt it glowing with energy.

Holding on, taking a breath, letting the energy fill them, and moving somehow, like stepping into the next room. But as they moved, both of them felt it -- they wouldn't be safe *there*, but if they moved just a little further, *here*, they would be -- they breathed in the energy and moved.

Thirty Three

Weiss and Ginzburg sat in the Box, watching the displays, hands on their buttons. Amy Weiss was a nurse, working with Doctor Morrow, but she had extensive training and experience in emergency room and ICU medicine. Walt Ginzburg was a systems specialist, responsible for the computer systems which gathered, parsed, filtered, and stored the information they collected.

Amy thought Walt was a clueless geek who really needed to bathe and brush his teeth a lot more than he did.

Walt thought Amy was cute, but wasn't sure what he had done to get her upset at him.

After watching the two subjects roll around in bed necking, it was almost a relief when they got up to shower.

Puttering around, straightening towels, getting clean clothes, adjusting the water temperature, getting in.

The shower wasn't that well lit; it was a shower, after all. The water flowing over them didn't help, either.

Amy couldn't understand why the guy wasn't dead from radiation burns -- when they'd pulled him out of The Beast after he'd damaged it and it had flashed over, the way he looked, with flash burns over 40% of his body, she would have put money on him not living 24 hours. And Russell wouldn't even let her run an EKG strip on him! He has a pulse, he's breathing, put him back! Yet he looked healthier now than he had before they loaded him into the damn chamber!

Amy looked at the screen again. She hit the electronic zoom, magnifying.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed, lifting her hand off the button and slamming it down on the large red button between her and Walt.

"Whut?" Walt mumbled, sitting up and shaking his head as the alarms sounded.

"They're gone! They're fucking gone!" Amy cursed.

Thirty Four

Paul pulled the rental car into the resort lodge's gravel parking lot. He looked to his left to his passenger, the physicist Widjиковsky, who had turned out to be an okay guy, and liked to be called Widgit. "Looks like we're here."

"Well, it could be worse," Widgit agreed. A day and a half ago he'd been sitting in an inquisition ("review meeting") in Bethesda when he'd been told to pack and go with Harris, one of the other camp!

"I hope we learn something," Paul added.

Widgit shook his head but smiled. "Not sure I want to know -- I just hope it takes us a few days here to mull it over."

Paul nodded. "We're meeting my boss, and he told me I'm here for a week."

Getting out of the car, inhaling the New Zealand mountain air, Widgit hoped it was true. "I could live with that," he said, stretching.

They went to the reception area and checked in, assigned to separate cabins. Each received a handwritten request to meet in the bar at 17:30 local time, in a few hours.

Widgit spent part of the time walking; the area was spectacular. Paul unpacked and after cleaning up and changing clothes, Paul went for a walk as well, and as he headed back, met Widgit on the trail. Both agreed they were glad they'd taken a walk.

They entered the bar together.

Paul was startled to see his boss without a tie, instead wearing a coarse woolen sweater, hiking pants, and boots.

"Mister Harris, Doctor Widjиковsky," the man called out from his table by the small fireplace.

The man didn't stand, but held out his hand to Widgit. "A pleasure to meet you, Doctor," he said as they shook hands. He then shook hands with Paul. "Please have a seat -- I hope your trip was pleasant?"

"Yes, sir, once we left the States," Paul told him.

The man gestured to a decanter and glasses. "Single malt Scotch -- help yourselves. If you want ice, I'll help them chase you down the road with sticks." He picked up his glass and took a sip.

Widgit poured for himself and Paul. He tasted and nodded, smiling.

They sat and sipped for a few minutes.

“Doctor Widjиковsky,” the man started out.

“Widgit is fine, Sir,” Widgit offered.

“Thank you. I’m not going to be high on formality or proper procedure. We understand you returned from a recent cruise short-handed as well as with a crippled device.”

Widgit nodded. “Leaving out the recriminations, accusations, and abuse, that’s about right.”

The man allowed himself a chuckle. He poured a little more into his glass. “I’ve requested an infinite rack of lamb for our dinner tonight. I hope you’ve brought appetites.”

Paul smiled, relaxing a bit, still amused at seeing the old man so seemingly informal. “I did -- we both walked the grounds after we arrived.”

“This is a beautiful place. I could get used to it,” Widgit agreed.

Both he and Paul were amazed and somewhat confused with their host laughed so hard he almost fell out of his chair.

When he regained his composure and wiped the tears from his eyes, the man took a folded piece of the resort stationery from his little bound notebook and handed it to Widgit. “Is this accurate?” he asked.

Widgit opened the paper, glanced at it, and almost dropped it. It was a block diagram of The Beast! “Uh, Sir, where did you get this?” Widgit asked.

The man smiled. “Drew it myself -- copied it from the source. Is it accurate? Oh, I’ll show you the original later; I left out some details, so it may be inaccurate.”

Widgit shook his head. “It’s too fucking accurate! It...” Widgit looked at the drawing again, shook his head, and took a gulp from his glass. “I...” He shook his head again and handed it back to the man. “Sir, would you do me a very big favor and put that in the fire? Now?”

The man smiled, turned, and dropped the paper into the fire, where it was consumed. “I’d be happy to, young man. You said, ‘too accurate’ -- what do you mean? What can you conclude about who did the original?”

Widgit picked up a glass of water from the small tray and drank about half of it. He put the glass down and shook his head. “The Beast, as we call it, is a very complex machine. Yet if you pare it down to essentials, if a physicist pares it down to essentials, you’d get the diagram you showed me. Other than some sketches a colleague and I made early on, I have never seen or

Awakening

prepared such a concise drawing.” Widgit shook his head and sighed. “If I met the bloke who did it, I’d ask him how he’d make it better, and I’d probably get a few damn good ideas.”

The man nodded. “Did you happen to spend any time talking to your guests on the cruise?”

Widgit shook his head. “Nope.”

“But you would recognize them if you saw them?”

Widgit nodded. “Oh yeah -- we took shifts monitoring them. I’d recognize them.”

“Paul, I believe you only saw pictures of them?” he asked.

Paul nodded. “Still images, and video of their ... abduction,” he said, glancing briefly at Widgit.

Widgit shrugged. “They came aboard sedated, sealed in steel cylinders. I didn’t see them until they were decanted.”

“Thank you, thank you both. I’m not interested in recriminations.” He gave Widgit a lopsided smirk, “I believe your people are superior to us in *that* regard as well, eh?”

Widgit smiled, looking at his empty glass. “Oh yeah -- your invitation came just at the right time.”

“I’m sure they continued without you,” the man offered, his smirk evening out into more of a smile.

“Oh, I’m sure,” agreed Widgit, sipping water.

Paul smiled, enjoying being out of the spotlight, at least for the moment.

That seemed to be the man’s cue to turn to Paul. “And your sub-rosa program in the states has turned up nothing in the intervening weeks, correct?”

Paul sat up a bit. He shouldn’t be that surprised that the old man knew about the unofficial continuation of the program. “That’s correct.”

The man nodded, reached under his bulky sweater and pulled out a device which looked like a laser pointer. When Paul blanched, he nodded and returned it to his shirt pocket. “I’ve gotten fascinating results with it, simply fascinating. But we’ll talk about those later. Did either of you have a chance to read up on this lodge?”

Widgit smiled and relaxed. He figured they were at the end of business for the night, which was fine with him. “Just a bit -- founded a while ago, if I remember.”

Paul just nodded.

The man smiled, picking up his water glass. "Built initially in the 1850's, and it was even more out of the way... Beautiful place. The trout are delicious, and quite a challenge to catch. I've been meaning to come here for a decade or more, and after recent ... events, I decided it was time to get away for a while..." He sighed and shook his head. "And what did I find?" He shook his head again, then looked up. "Ah, Nancy! Are you ready for us?"

Paul looked up to see one of the resort people approaching, a middle-aged woman.

Smiled and nodded. "If you gentlemen would like to wash up, we've got you in the old dining room where you'll have a bit of privacy."

The man stood up, joined by Paul and Widgit. "Thank you, Nancy, I am so glad I finally came here."

They stopped at a washroom and went to a smaller dining room while the other guests at the resort gathered around the larger tables in a more communal style.

It took Paul a little while to quit waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Widgit was in heaven, with a meal of salad, new potatoes, lamb, red wine, and more lamb.

After fruit and cheese for dessert, the man smiled. "Gentlemen, I highly recommend you spend a while looking at the stars tonight; they are spectacular. And as you do, you may wish to ponder man's position in the Universe, and our so-called understanding of it. I'd like to meet for breakfast in the big room tomorrow at 8:30, and afterwards, I promise to blow your minds."

Paul was astounded to hear such talk.

Widgit smiled and laughed, holding out a hand to the man. They shook. "But we can't leave for a few days, right?"

The man laughed heartily. "We can discuss that at lunch tomorrow."

The three of them praised the staff for the meal, and headed to their respective cabins.

Pausing on the porch of the main building, the man took a deep breath of the cool night air. "Wonderful!" He took a few steps to one side, struck an odd pose, and farted noisily. He turned to Paul and Widgit with a smile and said, "Sleep well, gentlemen," with a wave, and walked off.

Widgit laughed and clapped Paul on the shoulder. "Doesn't seem like someone who eats the hearts of summer interns for breakfast to me."

Awakening

Paul shook his head. “Do you recognize the Southern Cross?” he asked Widgit.

“Not yet,” replied Widgit.

Thirty Five

The three met for breakfast as agreed; they actually met on a trail back to the main lodge, having gone out for a morning walk.

They joined others at one of the big tables for a hearty breakfast. Paul was surprised when his boss introduced himself as “retired.”

They took a brief walk of the grounds after breakfast, the man going into more detail on the founding of the lodge. They ended up back in the main building.

One of the staff walked up to them as they entered, “All ready for you, Sir,” the woman said.

“Thank you, Beverly, thank you very much. To the right?”

“Yes -- let us know if you need anything.”

The man looked to Paul and Widgit with laughter in his eyes. “Gentlemen?”

They went to a small parlor; the man closed the double doors to give them some privacy. Against one wall was a large framed painting, covered by a sheet.

“I suggest both of you sit down,” he intoned with a bit more formality.

Widgit and Paul sat on the couch, facing the covered painting.

“I arrived here mid last week, scheduled for two weeks in heaven. The first night I walked into the Great Room, this is what I saw above that beautiful, massive fireplace.” He pulled the sheet off the painting.

Paul gasped. Widgit spat out, “Mother puss bucket!”

The man sat in a nearby chair. “Indeed!”

The three of them sat in silence for a bit, looking at a portrait of the two people they’d been searching for.”

“Look at the bottom,” the man suggested. “She took his name -- Robert and Carol Marsh. Painted November, 1884, thirty six years after this place was founded.”

“How?” Paul finally managed to say.

Widgit was still shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s them.”

“They built this place. If you research some of the early history, their relationship with the Maori natives was a very special one; the Maori respected them as ... I don’t remember their word for it, but as witch doctors or minor gods. She gave him thirteen children, and the stories are that he fathered quite a few more; a veritable population explosion. They lived here for at least sixty years, and then they went away. Nobody is quite sure when they died; the assumption is they died on an ill-fated trip to Australia,” the man told them calmly.

“This isn’t a joke,” Widgit asked.

The man shook his head. “This painting has hung over the main fireplace since it was made. It has only been moved when the place has been cleaned or refurbished. There are photographs starting from the early 1900’s taken in the Great Room that clearly show it in the background; they are clearly recognizable. And then there’s this, that not even the current generation was aware of.” He got up and turned the painting around. There on the lower left corner was a very detailed hand drawing.

Widgit got up and moved closer, going down on one knee. He reached in his pocket and took out a small white LED light, shining it on the drawing. “Holy fuck...” he muttered, sitting on the floor.

“Look right?” the man asked.

“Oh yeah, but don’t ask me how. They were on the receiving end.” Widgit sighed loudly, dropping his head and moving it side to side. He lifted his head again, looking briefly at Paul, and then to the man. “I thought I knew everyone on the planet who could draw that.”

The man sat down again. “Gentlemen, that’s all I have. Except for a few questions, of course. But I don’t think I’m going to find any quick, coherent answers.”

Widgit looked to Paul. “What the fuck am I supposed to report on this?”

Paul looked to the man with a smile. “Turn it around again, please?”

The man nodded, got up, and turned the portrait around.

Paul smiled. “They’re smiling and holding hands. Thirteen kids, countless grandkids, and this place? I’d say we did good bringing them together.”

“What the hell do I do now?” Widgit wondered aloud.

The man offered, “There’s a junior college south of here that needs a physics prof. And the University up North needs physics faculty. One of their folks is here as a guest -- they’re especially looking for someone to help with nuclear medicine, small accelerators and such.”

Widgit chuckled, looking at the man. “Really.”

Awakening

The man smiled, nodding. “Really. I’ll be happy to provide a reference.”

Paul looked to him. “What are you going to do?”

The man sat back, raising an eyebrow. “I’m hoping they need someone to teach Econ, International Relations, or sweep floors. I’m too old to emigrate, but I can still help out. Oh, I have retired. My wife joins me here in three days. I’ve recommended a sycophant and bootlicker for my old job...”

“Benjamin,” suggested Paul, making a sour face.

The man nodded with a smile. “The same. Sycophant, bootlicker, backstabber -- eminent qualifications for the people he’s going to be working with. I’ve highly recommended you, Mister Harris, for a Senior VP position that actually needs someone who knows which end is up. The politics involved are minimal; I suggest you consider it carefully. Officially, you’re here to try and talk me out of retiring, and I’m supposed to talk you into taking the SVP position, which reports directly to the Board.”

Paul sighed, sitting back.

The man smiled, nodding. “I think we can take a few days to talk things over. Doctor Widjиковsky, you’re looking for Professor Walsh. I mentioned you to him, and suggested you have just the attitude he’s looking for.” He stood up. “I may see you for lunch, gentlemen, but for now, I’m going to annoy some trout.”

He didn’t close the door behind him.

Widgit looked to Paul, sighed, and shook his head.

Paul looked at him. “I never did understand what it was all about. Care to tell me?”

Widgit made it to his feet. “Let’s find something to drink and a place to sit. What a trip!”

Paul looked at the two sitting in the portrait. “I don’t think we’re going to catch them.”

Widgit sighed again. “I hope the hell not!”

FIN

Rev 2009/12/05

Awakening
By silli_artie@hotmail.com
<http://www.asstr.org/~artie>